

CSIS Strategic Context: Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism

What CSIS has observed since the beginning of the pandemic

- Over the last few years, CSIS has increased resources dedicated to investigating and analyzing ideologically motivated violent extremism (IMVE) threats. CSIS' understanding of the IMVE milieu has informed advice to Government.
- The combination of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ever-increasing influence of social media and the spread of conspiracy theories has created an uncertain environment ripe for exploitation. Such an environment has the potential to inspire individuals to take violent extremist actions and move their message into the mainstream of society.
- IMVE is a serious threat to the security of Canada. A number of IMVE events have occurred in Canada, including the June 2021 London, Ontario attack on a Muslim family killing four and wounding another.
- IMVE is a complex and constantly evolving threat. Proponents of IMVE are driven by a range of influences rather than a singular belief system. Radicalization is often caused by a combination of ideas and grievances resulting in a personalized worldview, which often centres on the willingness to incite, enable or mobilize to serious violence. IMVE actors often act without a clear affiliation to a specific organized group or external guidance. Past events, such as the London, Ontario attacks, have shown the challenges associated with identifying threat actors that do not exhibit indicators of mobilization to violence before they actually commit violent acts.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated xenophobic (racial and ethno-nationalist) and anti-authority narratives. Some violent extremists view COVID-19 as a real but welcome crisis that could hasten the collapse of Western society (known as accelerationism). Many IMVE threat actors have adopted conspiracy theories about the pandemic in an attempt to rationalize and justify violence.
- While aspects of conspiracy theory rhetoric are a legitimate exercise in free expression, online rhetoric and activities that encourage violence have been of increasing concern. This violent rhetoric is easily disseminated using both mainstream and alternative media and social media platforms. Many of these platforms can be used anonymously or leverage encryption technologies to enable threat actors to conceal their identity and evade detection by law enforcement and security agencies, while spreading their message, inciting violence and recruiting like-minded individuals.
- The spread of violent rhetoric and the manipulation and propagation of information can erode confidence in our democratic values, institutions, and polarize communities while undermining trust in our democratically elected governments. It also normalizes the use of violent rhetoric and the threatening of actual violence as a means to express dissent, which negatively affects societal resilience.
- CSIS has actively been investigating IMVE actors that present a threat of serious violence pursuant to its mandate and authorities under the *CSIS Act*. But to be clear,

CSIS does not investigate lawful advocacy, protest or dissent, but only activities that rise to the level of a threat to the security of Canada.

- In confronting the IMVE threat, CSIS has collaborated with the RCMP, the Department of Justice and the Public Prosecution Service of Canada to align operational efforts, and seek solutions in the interest of public safety.
- In addition, CSIS has worked closely with its domestic and international partners on understanding the evolution of the threat environment to provide assessments and advice to support actions, including by law enforcement where appropriate.

What CSIS is seeing now

- Since the beginning of the Freedom Convoy 2022 and the protests and blockades across the country, CSIS efforts have focused on its IMVE subjects of investigation and their activities in relation to those events.
- The protests themselves and the vast majority of protestors are not relevant to CSIS' mandate. However, as demonstrated by the Breach of the US Capitol Building on January 6, 2021, IMVE actors may exploit lawful protests, rallies, demonstrations and other gatherings to carry out IMVE-related violence and criminal activity. Given this trend, CSIS is closely monitoring the opportunities the protests may present to IMVE actors to promote or engage in serious acts of violence in Canada. CSIS is also aware that the protests may offer opportunities to lone wolf actors.
- CSIS is also guarding against other threats to Canada's national security in relation to the protests, such as foreign interference. With respect to foreign sources of funding, CSIS' mandate is engaged when funds are provided at the direction of a foreign state with the goal of engaging in foreign interference activities in Canada, or when those donating the money are doing so to support an act of serious violence or terrorism. To date, CSIS has not observed this.
- Since the beginning of the protests, there have been unlawful activities, but CSIS has not observed activities that would suggest that there is planning, plotting or inspiring of others to engage in serious violence. However, as the protests continue and frustrations, anxiety and tension increase, it is possible that an individual or small group may be willing to engage in violence.
- This is what appears to have occurred in Coutts, Alberta. On February 14, 2022, the RCMP arrested 13 individuals in relation to the blockade at the Coutts border crossing. These individuals were in possession of firearms, ammunition and body armor. This development is concerning as it indicates the intent and capabilities of individuals to engage in serious acts of violence.
- The Coutts blockade began as part of the broader anti public health measures movement and was driven by a similar range of narratives and grievances as seen in the Ottawa occupation. The bringing together of individuals with differing ideological motivations around a common cause is typical of the IMVE space. However, each radicalization pathway or mobilization to violence is highly individual, and discerning

common features or triggers in order to predict action is a core challenge for CSIS and law enforcement partners.

- CSIS has observed that the declaration of emergency by the Province of Ontario on February 11, 2022, has resulted in a significant increase in violent rhetoric towards the Premier of Ontario and other senior elected officials.

Forward looking

- Looking at how best to manage the unfolding situation, the authorities are faced with two sets of concerns, both of which have potentially deleterious effects and the potential to increase threat activities.
- While the invocation of the *Emergencies Act* and the ensuing enforcement actions have the potential to increase the number of Canadians holding extreme anti-government views, it could also have a deterrent effect on many of the protesters and facilitate an end to the protests.
- The invocation of the *Emergencies Act* could also negatively influence the behaviours of CSIS' subjects of investigations and others who may not have yet embarked on a path to radicalization.
- Some individuals involved in IMVE movements are likely to view the announcement relating to the invocation of the *Emergencies Act* as confirmation of their core accelerationist beliefs. This, in turn, could lead to increased volume of extreme online chatter and would likely further their radicalization pathways towards violence.
- As part of its mandate, CSIS remains alive to these different scenarios and maintains awareness of the unfolding situation, and is using all the authorities and tools at its disposal to investigate and assess threats to the security of Canada to provide advice to Government and where appropriate consider the use of threat reduction measures.
- CSIS will continue to assess various intelligence questions to better understand, among others, the catalytic nature of the protests as well as government and enforcement actions (or inactions) on our subjects of investigations, in terms of motivation to mobilize or encourage serious violence, rhetoric, resources and followers.
- While the IMVE threats directly implicate CSIS' mandate, there are broader strategic considerations at play. In particular, the manifestation of IMVE activities affect policy considerations related to online harms, the resilience of our democratic institutions, the security of parliamentarians, dialogue with racialized communities, and engagements on national security issues at all levels of government.